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ABSTRACT

Quality of life at an academic institution includes students' perception of the university environment, perceptions of their cultural fit within the environment and stress created by environmental context. African American students perceived their predominantly white university more negatively than their white counterparts. Understanding the environmental context and academic comfort of African Americans in higher education is particularly important when personal academic achievement is sought. Evidence suggests that African Americans attending Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) experience significantly greater levels of overt racism, feelings of isolation, personal dissatisfaction and stress. If the environment at PWCUs is unwelcoming and intolerant of African Americans it can lead to depression and social alienation. Social alienation plays a significant role in adjustment to college as evidenced in research. Research will be cited that students of social alienation are less effective socially, had fewer friends, felt lonelier, and participated less in extracurricular activities. Social alienation experienced at PWCUs is expressed and perceived by the quality of relationships between the African American and White population of students, teachers, counselors, advisors and staff. A lack of diversity in the staff, social activities and academic organizations on PWCUs concerns people of color and produces anxieties that can affect a student's ability to learn and succeed. Included are accompanying power point presentation slides. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/GCP)

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Running Head: AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Social Alienation of African American College Students: Implications for Social Support Systems

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Abstract

Quality of life at an academic institution includes students' perception of the university environment, perceptions of their cultural fit within the environment and stress created by environmental context. African American students perceived their predominantly white university more negatively than their white counterparts. Understanding the environmental context and academic comfort of African Americans in higher education is particularly important when personal academic achievement is sought. Evidence suggests that African Americans attending Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) experience significantly greater levels of overt racism, feelings of isolation, personal dissatisfaction and stress. If the environment at PWCUs is unwelcoming and intolerant of African Americans it can lead to depression and social alienation.

Social alienation plays a significant role in adjustment to college as evidenced in research. Research will be cited that students of social alienation are less effective socially, had fewer friends, felt lonelier, and participated less in extracurricular activities. Social alienation experienced by African Americans at PWCUs is expressed and perceived by the quality of relationships between the African American and White population of students, teachers, counselors, advisors, and staff. A lack of diversity in the staff, social activities and academic organizations on PWCUs concerns people of color and produces anxieties that can affect a student's ability to learn and succeed.

Social Alienation of African American College Students: Implications for Social Support Systems

Quality of life at an academic institution includes students' perception of the university environment, perceptions of a cultural fit within the environment and stress created by environmental context (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Understanding the environmental context and academic comfort of African Americans in higher education is particularly important when personal academic achievement is sought. Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997; Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius (1996) found that African American students perceived their predominately white university more negatively than their white counterparts. Evidence suggests that African Americans attending Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) experience significantly greater levels of overt racism, feelings of social isolation, personal dissatisfaction, and stress more than their white counterparts. These experiences are not unexpected because most U.S. institutions of higher education discount values and beliefs that are not consistent with White, middle-class, male values (Beauboef-Lafontant & Augustine, 1996; Cervantes, 1988; Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997). For racial and ethnic minorities and particularly African Americans attending PWCUs, if the environment is unwelcoming and intolerant of their presence on campus it can lead to depression and social alienation.

Social Alienation

Social alienation plays a significant role in adjustment to college as evidenced in the research of Augustine Pounds (1987). Pounds found that victims of social alienation were less effective socially, had fewer friends, felt lonelier, and participated less in extra-curricular activities. Social alienation experienced by African Americans at PWCUs is

expressed and perceived by the quality of relationships between the African American and the White population of students, teachers, counselors, advisors, and staff. A lack of diversity in the staff, social activities and academic organizations in PWCUs concerns all minority groups and produces special anxieties that can affect a students' ability to learn and succeed (James, 1992).

Burbach and Thompson's (1973) research has shown African Americans to be more socially alienated than Whites in the powerlessness and normlessness sense. Their research suggested that African Americans experienced a greater sense of purposelessness (the loss of socialized values and the absence of values that might give purpose to life) and more of a feeling of being confronted with contradictory normative patterns than their White counterparts. Steward, Jackson, and Jackson (1990) found that the environment on many campuses in the late 1980s made African American students feel like "strangers in a strange land." The results of their study of successful African American students suggested that even those students who fit in academically remained "alien" interpersonally and that those students who remained a "stranger" often were able to graduate and become academically successful. The transition to PWCUs for African Americans tends to be much harder than for their white counterparts.

Presently, African American students are still experiencing social alienation at PWCUs. These stressful academic experiences and strained social relationships can be devastating, resulting in feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, segregation, and exclusion (James, 1992). These are some experiences that have contributed to African Americans feelings of social alienation?

1. Not being *racially* prepared for standardized tests;

2. Falling into a lower socioeconomic status;
3. Large, demanding classes which leave little room for personal needs;
4. The inability of the university to address the needs of African Americans;
5. Lack of university becoming an integral part of the socializing process;
6. Lack of respect from the faculty for African American students;
7. Lack of respect of peers at the university;
8. Lack of determination of some African American students;
9. Administrative control of African American students (James, 1992).

James (1992) suggests that African American students can help feelings of social alienation, powerlessness, and meaninglessness through training and educating on the concepts set forth in the P.R.I.D. E. scale. The concepts are, Pride, Respect-for self and others, Integrity, Determination, and Enthusiasm. This allows for a deep appreciation and understanding of their cultural identities, values and practices. It could restore the strength and power needed to not only survive and thrive but also to be proactive, overcome, go forward, and to continue to be successful.

Social Support

Establishing social support networks of friends and academic mentors can decrease African American student's discomfort on PWCUs (Griffin, 1991; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996). By addressing the concerns of African American students in higher education, Fleming (1984, 1990) noted that personal and academic support contributes to more positive perceptions of the university environment. Tinto (1975) believed that social support systems allows students to become socially integrated and involved in the academic environment, thus decreasing decision not to persist with

school. In support on Tinto's model (1975), DeFour and Hirsch (1990) found that among 89 African American graduate and professional students, that those who had out of class contact with African American faculty and students were less likely to consider dropping out of school. In addition, African American students who developed informal relationships with faculty or mentors were more likely to have greater perceived gains in academic skill development (Hackett & Byars, 1996; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Lorang, 1982).

By having faculty mentors who have successfully traversed the academic environment and having racially and ethnically similar peers who are persisting in their education may create a sense of vicarious self-efficacy (Cervantes, 1988), or a belief in one's abilities to complete certain tasks to obtain a specific outcome (Bandura, 1982, 1989). That is, looking to others who are academically successful can help students increase their beliefs that they too can successfully persist (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996; Hackett & Byars, 1996).

In a study with Gloria et al (1996), three related variables-perceptions of the university environment, cultural congruity, and academic stress were used to assess university comfort. African American students who were more likely to persist viewed the university environment more positively, perceived greater cultural fit between themselves and the university, and experienced less academic stress. Social support, comprised of support from family and friends and perceived mentoring, is a strong predictor of persistence in school for African American students. Approximately 80% of the African American students reported that at least one faculty or staff person was supporting the academically and contributing to their academic success (Gloria, Robinson

Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999). The means for family support and friend support indicated that these students felt encouragement from both support systems. Social support from family and friends appear to buffer African American college students from depression and isolation.

Conclusion and Future Research

PWCUs can increase the comfort of African Americans in the academic environment in multiple ways. Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) suggested that upper divisional racial and ethnic minority students provide paraprofessional counseling and mentoring for their incoming and lower divisional counterparts. By establishing peer mentorship among the divisional classes of African Americans, it will make student feel welcomed and received upon entering college. If we want to help all students go forth and be successful, we need to aid in their concerns. The following are suggested resources from the literature:

1) Encourage African American students to establish social support systems of friends and academic mentors.
2) Encourage African American students to use extended family as a helping and caring network, which will assists in building self-esteem, values, competencies, and relationship patterns.
3) Encourage African American students to get involved with social organizations/fraternal groups that supplement Black extended family network, provide experiences with leadership, business, political, and civic affairs.

4) Encourage African American students to get involved with church to promote spiritual and social needs, provide strength and ability to make meaning of life and transform negative energy into positive accomplishments.

There are many ways in which we can aid in helping African American students feel welcomed on PWCUs. It will take a concerted effort of the university to complete these things and ensure that faculty, staff, and counselors partake in them.

Future research in this area needs to be conducted on how African Americans can adapt without being involved in religious activities, Greek fraternities and sororities, service organizations, and familial activities. Not all African Americans see these things as social support networks and would no get involved with them. Also, research needs to be conducted in the area of why some African Americans choose college life at a PWCU knowing the racial homogeneity and the alienation they may potentially feel.

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Counseling African Americans with Feelings of Social Alienation at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

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ACES Presentation, Park City, Utah
Fall 2002

History of African Americans Attendance at PWCU's

- The 1950's and 1960's exhibited a continuing pattern of almost complete segregation of the races in the realm of higher education.
- In 1954, the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision struck down the notion of separate but equal education for Whites, Blacks, and other racial and ethnic groups.
- During the 1970's many African Americans on PWCU's embraced the ideology of Black Power, which advocated Black unity, celebrated Black culture, and employed more aggressive tactics for gaining Black liberation from various forms of oppression.
- Black students attempted to alleviate their alienation, facilitate their resiliency, increase their retention, enhance their chances of school success, and make educations more relevant to the Black experience.
- Black students formed Black Student Unions, Black Studies Departments, Black Cultural Centers, and Academic Support Systems.

African Americans Attendances at HBCUs v PWCUs

- Research in the last few years suggests that African American students attending HBCUs might be making intellectual gains that are equal to and perhaps greater than peers at PWCUs.
- Defreese and Koh (1990) found that African American students across all class levels at HBCUs reported significantly greater gains during college in such areas as critical thinking, historical and cultural awareness, and arts and literature than peers at PWCUs.
- Although an argument can be made that racial homogeneity of HBCUs tend to reinforce racial separation, rather than increasing the interaction and understanding among different racial groups.
- The roles of HBCUs reinforcing racial segregation need to be weighted against a growing body of evidence that HBCUs are more effective than PWCUs in providing a supportive social and psychological climate for African American students.
- Recent evidence suggests that attendance at an HBCU rather than a PWCU has only a small impact on African American students' openness to diversity during college.
- The National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) found that when extensive set of controls was introduced, such as precollege academic ability, African American students at HBCUs and PWCUS made essentially the same gains.

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African Americans Feelings of Social Alienation

- Social alienation experienced by African Americans at PWCUs is expressed and perceived by the quality of relationships between African American and White population of students, teachers, counselors, advisors, and staff.
- African Americans feel more socially alienated than Whites in the powerlessness and normlessness sense.
- Some African American students feel like strangers in a strange land.

Experiences that Contribute to Social Alienation

- Not being racially prepared for standardized test
- Falling into a lower socioeconomic status
- Large, demanding classes which leave little room for personal needs
- The inability of the university to address the needs of African Americans
- Lack of university becoming an integral part of the socializing process
- Lack of respect from the faculty for African American Students
- Lack of respect from peers at the university
- Lack of determination of some African American students
- Administrative control of African American students

Social Support Networks Help with Social Alienation

- Establishing social support networks of friends and academic mentors can decrease African American student's discomfort.
- African Americans can use an extended family as a helping and caring network that assists in building self-esteem, values, competencies, and relationship patterns.
- African American students can get involved with social organizations/fraternal groups that supplement the Black extended family network and educational institutions and provide leadership in business, political, and civic affairs.
- African American students can get involved with the church to promote all of the above, address spiritual and social needs, and provide the strength and ability to make meaning and transform negative energy into positive accomplishments.

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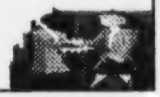
Counseling African American Students

- Develop Cultural Self-Awareness
- Avoid Value Imposition
- Accept Your Naiveté
- Show Cultural Empathy
- Incorporate Cultural Consideration into Counseling
- Build on Client's Strength



Therapeutic Actions

- Identify the expectations of Black clients, find out what they believe counseling is, and explore their feelings about counseling.
- Indicate what you feel counseling is and what you do during counseling. Find out if they feel it will be useful to them.
- Find out how the client feels about working with an individual from a different ethnic group.
- Gather information on their family.
- After information about the problem has been gathered, establish mutually agreed-upon goals.
- Talk about and consider the means to achieve goals.
- Determine whether the client feels the two of you can work together.

BE AWARE OF STEREOTYPES

- Black male clients are hostile, angry, or alienated both with themselves and the counselor.
- Black clients are from broken homes, and their family life is disorganized.
- Black clients have poor self-concepts, and a restrictive, substandard language pattern.
- Blacks are poor test-takers, and have high vocational aspirations but low occupational expectations.
- Blacks hold a poor concept of work and are vocational immature.
- Blacks lack an internal frame of reference and have difficulty dealing with intrapsychic material.
- Blacks have difficulty relating effectively in a one-to-one relationship with others.
- Are less verbal and more action-oriented, more concrete than abstract-oriented.

(Smith, 1977)

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Racially Related Defenses

- Color Blindness – an illusion that the African American client is no different from non-African American clients.
- Color Consciences – an illusion that the client's problems stem essentially from being African American, places too much weight on the color of the client, while overlooking the client's contributions to the problem.
- Cultural Transference – the client's negative interactions with and feelings toward other members of the counselor's racial groups are projected onto the counselor.

Racially Related Defense Cont.

- Cultural Countertransference – due to past negative interactions with other members of the client's race, emotional reactions of the counselor of one race are projected onto the client of another race.
- Cultural Ambivalence – counselor has ambivalent motives in treating African American client
- Over identification – African American counselors overidenitifying with African American clients' negative experiences, thus failing to conceptualize the client's presenting problem in its total context.

Questions of Racial and Cultural Factors

- What are some ways counselors can increase their awareness with racial/ethnic minority students?
- How does your racial/cultural/religious background heritage make your family different from other families you know?
- Compared to other families in your cultural groups, how is your family different?
- What are the values that your family identify as being important parts of your heritage?
- At this particular time in your (family's) development, are there issues related to your cultural heritage that are being questioned by anyone?
- What is the hardest part about being a person of color in America?

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Questions of Racial and Cultural Factors

- When you think of living in American versus the country of your heritage, what are the main differences?
- What lessons are you learning about your people? About other people?
- What did you learn about disloyalty in your family?
- What were people in your family really down on?
- What might an outsider not understand about or racial/cultural/religious background?

Hanna & Brown (1995)
Assessment overtures of racial cultural factors.

Afrocentric Approach to African Proverbs

- The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people (Ashanti)
- Even an ant may harm an elephant. (Zululand)
- A roaring lion kills no game. (Tanzania)
- He who is being carried does not realize how far the town is. (Nigeria)
- One camel does not make fun of another camel's hump. (Guinea)
- He who conceals his disease cannot expect to be cured. (Ethiopia)
- A brother is like one's shoulders. (Somalia)

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